

bullying: a school responds

By Coletta Fidler

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The students surrounded us for their workshop. Some didn't want to come. But it was the beginning of a new school year at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf and the workshop was required—as it is every year.

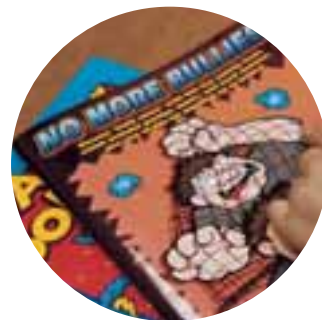
First we give it to the school's athletes. Then we incorporate it into our orientation for new students. Finally, we give it to the whole school.

The topic of this workshop is so important: Bullying. We began with definitions.

“What is *bullying*?” we asked.

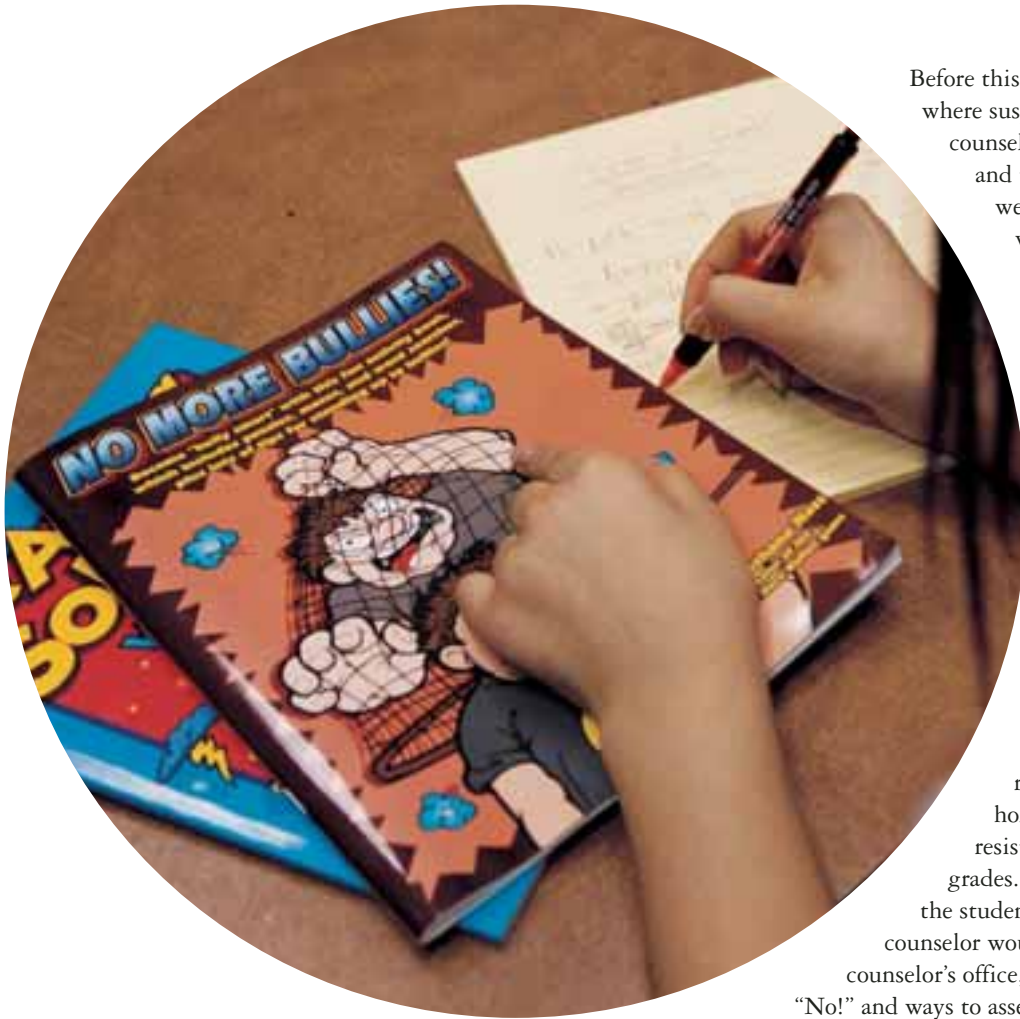
Bullying has gone on in schools for decades. Defined as “browbeating” or being “habitually cruel to others who are weaker” (Merriam-Webster Online), bullying can cause physiological and psychological injuries that last a lifetime. Unchecked, this behavior can lead the bully to drug and gang cultures and eventually prison. It can drive the victim to depression and suicidal thoughts. At the very least, bullying interferes with the social, emotional, and academic progress of both the victim and the bully.

Counselors and teachers often are unaware of bullying going on because students hesitate to report it. This workshop evolved as part of a comprehensive plan for preventing bullying in our school.



Right: Fidler, one of the counselors at the Clerc Center, works with teenagers to prevent school bullying.





Before this workshop was developed, in instances where suspicions of hazing occurred, we required counseling—for those who were the bullies and those who were their victims. There were several sessions for each new student who had been a victim to the bullying and several sessions for the students who had done the bullying. In counseling we used various techniques to help those who had been bullied to build their own self-concepts and to explore different ways to react to those who would bully them.

For example, role playing was a popular technique. The counselor would insist that the student take on the role of the bully, and the counselor would take on the role of a prospective victim. “Don’t do your homework,” the student would say in a pretend role of dominance. “I have to do my homework,” the counselor, in the role of resistance, would respond. “I care about my grades.” Then roles were reversed. This time the student would play the resister and the counselor would play the bully. In the safety of the counselor’s office, the students would learn ways to say “No!” and ways to assert their own feelings and strengths as individuals.

As the counseling sessions progressed, it was heartening to see the self-concepts of students who had been bullied become stronger. They became more assertive outside of the counseling

The students told us what they thought bullies do and we wrote down their replies:

- Boss people around
- Brag
- Haze people
- Humiliate people
- Make fun of people
- Spread rumors about people

Then we discussed what students can do to prevent bullying. They knew the answers to that question, too, and we wrote down their suggestions:

- Tell an adult
- Stick up for friends
- Don’t try to get even
- Leave any situation that presents danger
- Tell the person, “Stop that! I don’t like that!”
- Walk away



office. The bullies changed their behavior as well. All of the students settled into their classes and programs. Both groups of students saw improvements in their academic work.

But as the counselors of the mental health team, we knew that this was not enough. I got on the web and searched for helpful information. I found *The Bully Free Classroom* by Allan Beane (1999), with strategies for preventing and responding to bullying at school.

Using this book, the counselors of the mental health team developed the workshop that starts out every school year. Interactive and informative, the workshop carries a simple and straightforward message: Bullying of any sort is not tolerated. Period.

Reference

Beane, A. (1999). *The bully free classroom*. Free Spirit Publishing. Minneapolis, MN.

PREVENTING BULLYING

Strategies with students:

- Build students' self-esteem.
- Promote a community feeling and personal ties among students in the classroom.
- Listen when students report problems to you.
- Initiate a zero tolerance policy.

Strategies with teachers and staff:

- Explore the feelings of teachers and staff.
- Ensure that teachers and staff understand that the school has a zero tolerance policy.
- Encourage teachers and staff to listen to students.
- Insist that teachers and staff also respond to students. They should:
 - follow up to see on what students base their reports,
 - identify the real problem, and
 - work with students to solve the problem.

Strategies with schools and programs:

- Hold a workshop on bullying.
- Incorporate the workshop into the orientation for new students.
- Incorporate the same workshop for all students.
- Explore students' feelings about bullies and bullying.
- Make sure that students understand that the policy is zero tolerance.

